



**BUILDING** ■ The fragmented whole: Mitchell Taylor Workshop in Bath

*Careful attention to local conditions creates magical spaces in a mixed-use riverside development, finds Meredith Bowles.*  
 Photos: Peter Cook.

When Piers Taylor of Mitchell Taylor Workshop was approached to design a mixed-use scheme for a site on the bank of the River Avon in Bath, his clients, Peter Cockhill and Adrian Baker, were looking to relocate an alternative therapy business into new premises, adding a martial arts dojo and changing rooms to the seven treatment rooms and support offices they already used. In order for the development to be financially viable it was also necessary to add two residential units to the brief.

The site is the urban equivalent of ‘below-stairs’ in a country house. The riverside is rich with historical evidence of what allows the grand houses further up the hill to function:

here are the yards and alleys that run from the river and feed the buildings; here is where things were made, repaired, distributed, and stored. The names give it away, with The Foundry and The Tramshed occupying streets such as Beehive Lane and Old Orchard. The site itself was formerly a stonemason’s yard. The adjacent yards still have an informality suggesting medieval rather than Georgian planning, although all are now in the shadow of the back elevations of the huge limestone terraces that line the city centre proper.

Taylor began by talking to the planning authorities to define some development constraints, with the knowledge that the heritage



**Above** A first-floor dojo with projecting window is located across the courtyard from two houses.

**Right** The houses overlook the Avon.



interest in the location would be acute. Discussions determined significant views, height limits, access, car parking, and the relationship of the new development to an adjacent listed building. Further complications around an easement for a main public sewer – and 13 Party Wall Awards – produced a matrix of restrictions around which the new building had to fit. A brief was developed that Taylor describes as ‘jam-packed with programme to the point that the building literally bulges over the adjacent land’.

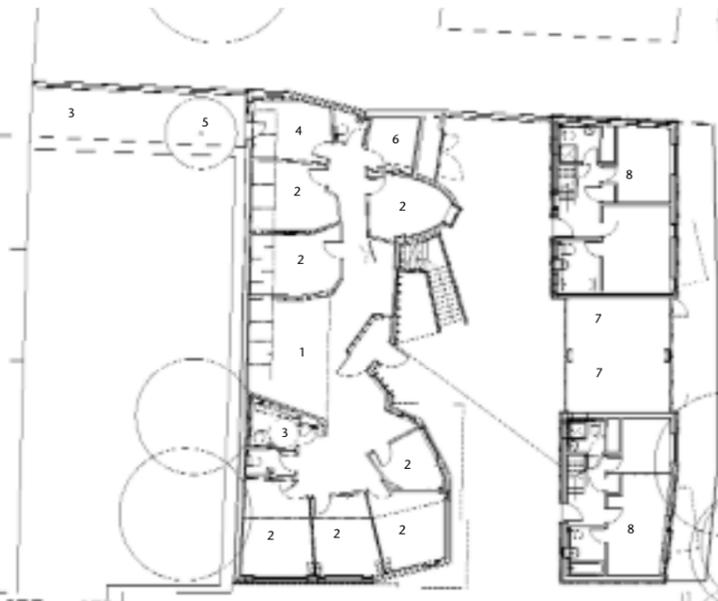
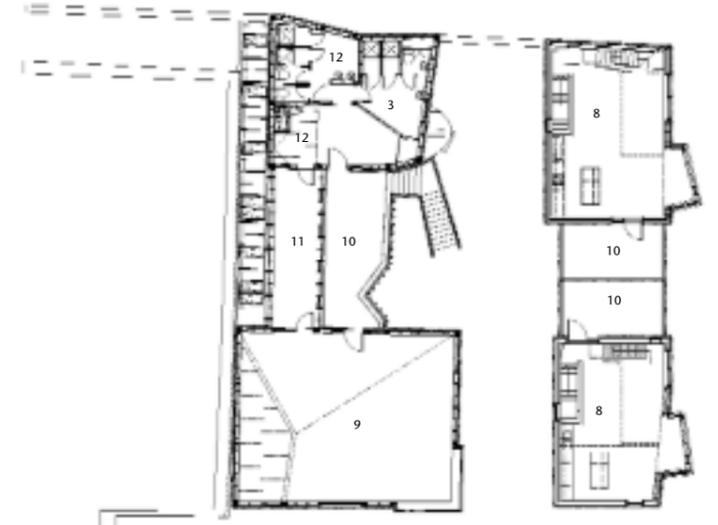
The resultant scheme feels like a single building fractured into many parts, with each responding to its particular condition. The stacked slate cladding of the lower walls – a nod to the former stoneworks – twists and turns into the entry to the clinic, and forms a tough square end to north of the site. Each pitch of the zinc roofs is derived from the desire to gain the best light, optimise internal space, or catch a view while

remaining true to the initial planning principles. Once inside, the upper levels have a delightful informality that creates spaces that feel lofty, light-filled and intimate by turns. The dojo – the largest space of all and the culmination of an expressed route – is a delightful timber-lined room with a large triangular rooflight, off-centre bay windows, and asymmetrical timber soffits that swoop down to the windows.

The ground-floor spaces have a lack of aspect that would challenge the most silver-tongued estate agent. Perhaps in medieval times such rooms would have been open to the street, gaining light and spilling onto the pavement, but today, for this use, that isn’t a feasible option, and glazed internal screens were dropped during the inevitable cost-cutting exercise, which has left the treatment rooms slightly mean, although some relief comes from top-light brought in through the stepped section.



**Top, below** The open deck of the martial arts centre addresses the courtyard and allows east-west views through the site.  
**Above** Location plan: 1 site with existing buildings, 2 River Avon, 3 Walcott Street.



The two houses overlook the river, with an upside-down section and cantilevered bays that make best use of the view. The upper-floor living spaces extend onto outside decks above the garages that separate the houses on the ground floor. The houses feel generous, and the sleeping lofts under the roofs are essentially a bonus for the developer.

The whole complex is unified externally by a continuous facade of black-stained softwood battens, fixed end-on and separated by wide softwood boards, with the battens extending beyond the parapet to create a continuous screen above the slate base. Taylor’s obstinacy in not conforming to a beige and cream palette, which surely would have been a safer bet with Bath’s planners, was not without reason. Closer observation of the surrounding yards reveals red bricks, black granite setts, black-painted doors and clay tiled roofs. Even the stone has blackened to a uniform hue. Against this specific material backdrop, the blackness doesn’t jar, and in fact helps to make the scale of the buildings a little bolder, which befits their context.

**Above** Stairs to martial arts centre.

**Right** Ground-, first- and second-floor plans: 1 reception, 2 treatment room, 3 office, 4 group room, 5 walled garden, 6 plant, 7 garage, 8 house, 9 dojo, 10 deck, 11 glazed link, 12 changing room.



Taylor agonises over bits that didn't work as intended and dismisses some parts as 'rather overwrought and over-complicated'. Certainly what makes the complex convincing are the clear-headed moves that make it sit well in its context, and the confidence to unify the disparate parts into a single work. From across the river the two residential buildings are seen through self-seeded alder

trees growing from the bank. The buildings have a delicacy that gives them a Japanese quality, with simple timber detailing, black staining, and framed views. The same qualities appear again when the site is seen from above, at the rear – simplicity, cohesiveness, and a clever approach to tricky planning problems that has created some magical spaces.

*Meredith Bowles is director of Mole Architects whose projects include an extension to the architecture school at Cambridge University and the Black House near Ely.*

**Above** The dojo lined in sheets of fair-faced plywood.

**Below left** Sleeping loft and first-floor living room in one of the two houses.

**Below** First-floor glazed link between the changing area and the dojo.



**Mitchell Taylor Workshop/Invisible Studio**

Piers Taylor, a founding director of Mitchell Taylor Workshop, was commissioned to design the Stillpoint Clinic in 2007. In 2012 he founded a new practice, Invisible Studio. He is also studio master for the Architectural Association's Design & Make programme.

**Project team**

Architect: Mitchell Taylor Workshop; design team: Piers Taylor (right), Tinyue Liu, Kris Eley; structural engineer: Structures 1; party wall surveyors: Carter Hughes Davis; qs: Mildred Howells; contractor: Pollards.

**Selected suppliers and subcontractors**

Rigid insulation to roofs and floors: Celotex; insulation to internal stud walls: Sound Pro by Rockwool; cavity closers: Kingspan Thermabate; cavity wall ties, cladding fixings: Ancon; bitumen-based damp-proof course: Ruberoid; precast concrete lintels: Naylor; prefabricated steel lintels: IG Lintels; glazing to clinic: Standard Patent Glazing Co.; glass: Pilkington; breather membrane: Proctor Industries Roofshield; slate cladding: Welsh Slate; silicone sealant: Adstead Ratcliffe; zinc roof: VM Zinc; loose-laid polyethylene damp proofing: Visqueen; bentonite tanking: RIW



Structureseal; single layer polymeric sheet roof coverings: Bauder; birch plywood: Avon Plywood; beech flooring: Junckers; sliding panel partitions: Versiplan by Becker; garage door gear: Henderson; window privacy film: Purifrost; plaster: British Gypsum Multifinish; bathroom tiles: Rotondo by Domus Tiles; internal paint to houses: Dulux; decorative woodstain to windows: Sadolin; varnish to fair-faced internal plywood and plaster: Ronseal Diamond Glaze; decorative woodstain to external timber boarding: Sikken; kitchens: IKEA; fall arrest system: ManSafe by Latchways; ironmongery: FSB Allgood.